

Acts 4:32-35

Easter 2 Midweek + April 11, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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Great Grace and Charity

The Word of the Lord from Acts 4:33-35: "Great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

The first Christians in Jerusalem sold what they had, pooled their resources and took care of each other. This happens twice in the book of Acts – at the end of Acts 2 and here in Acts 4. This is a text with good news – and a great potential for mischief.

See, it's been argued in the past that our text is the proper model of the New Testament Church, but the model might vary a little. On the one hand, some have said that this is proof that the first Christians were communists, and therefore the Church should condemn capitalism and support socialism: they shared everything equally, and so should you.

I'm also betting that a scurrilous pastor or two has pointed out that, not only did the first Christians sell their stuff, but they gave it to the preachers to distribute. "Sell all you have and give it to the pastor": now, there's an idea – a really, really bad idea.

So what do we do with this text? First off, we should do a little housekeeping and note that there's a difference in the Bible between prescriptive and descriptive texts. Prescriptive texts *prescribe* – they tell you what you should be doing. So for instance, when the Lord says, "Thou shalt not kill," it's prescriptive: He's telling you what you should be doing, namely preserving life. Likewise, He tells you to repent, "Take and eat," love your neighbor, etc. Those are prescriptive texts. On the other hand, descriptive texts simply describe things that happen without telling you to do anything. Some examples would be texts that tell that Jonah was swallowed by a great fish or that David killed Goliath with a slingshot. You do not have to be swallowed by a great fish or kill giants with a slingshot to be a Christian: these are simply things that happened.

Sometimes, people confuse the two and turn descriptions into laws. For instance, I've heard people argue that since David danced before the Ark of the Covenant, we should include dance in worship. Or, since John the Baptist ate locusts and wild honey, maybe that should be part of your nutritious breakfast (I'd certainly lose weight!). But this is bad interpretation: this is turning descriptions into commandments.

Our text is another example. It's descriptive: it tells us what the first Christians did, how they handled their resources. But it isn't prescriptive: there's no command in the text that you have to do the same thing to be a Christian. You don't have to sell everything you have and give it to me in order to be a forgiven child of God.

So why is this text here – why is this description included? The answer may be unexpected, but also should be unsurprising: this description is here to point to Christ.

"There was not a needy person among them," says our text; and while it doesn't show up in the English, there's a link in the language that points us back to Deuteronomy 15:4-5: "But there will be no poor among you; for the LORD will bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an

inheritance to possess – if only you will strictly obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all this commandment that I command you today.” Back at the time of Moses, the LORD declared to the Israelites that there would be no needy people among them in the Promised Land if they were careful to obey all of His commands. You know what happened: they failed to keep His commands and rebelled against Him. In consequence, there was poverty, hunger, affliction, invasion and death. They were needy because they rejected the Lord who provides.

In Acts 4, the first Christians are in Jerusalem, the heart of the Promised Land. They have not carefully obeyed all of God’s commands – they’re sinful, and so they don’t deserve the Lord’s blessing. They would be lost and condemned, but they trust in Christ who has just died for their sins and risen and ascended. For the sake of Jesus, God blesses them because He sees them as forgiven – with their sin removed, He sees them as His beloved children who have kept His commands. Therefore, He fulfills His promise: there are no poor among them, because the Lord has blessed them. First and foremost, He has blessed them with salvation in Christ. By means of the Word, great grace is upon them all. Next, He blesses them with what they need for this life. How? As He often does, He uses people to accomplish His will: *He uses these Christians to share with each other so that there are no needy among them.*

In other words: in Deuteronomy 15, the Lord declared that there would be no needy among His people when He blessed them. In Acts 4, the fact that there are no needy among them is an announcement that God has blessed them – namely, He has blessed them with redemption because Christ has come. The fact that there are no needy among them is an announcement that the Messiah has come and saved His people.

So the first believers share what they have with one another. Thankful for grace and trusting that God will provide, they have everything in common. It won’t last long, though: persecution is coming. Those who have rejected the blessing of Jesus will come after His people. Rather than share and provide, they will take and confiscate. They’ll drive the believers out of Jerusalem. Because they reject the blessing of Jesus, eventually there will be no city more needy than Jerusalem: all of them will be starved nearly to death before the Romans break down the walls and finish the job.

So there you go: the lesson of this text is not that you have to sell everything you have and give it to me. Rather, the charity of these first Christians is an announcement that God has blessed His people by sending the Savior.

Having said all that, though, there is a danger in becoming too attached to the things that you are free to hold onto. Possessions so easily become idols that we must hold onto and can’t part with, even when it means ignoring those in need. Consider, for instance, Hebrews 10:

But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, *since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.* (Hebrews 10:32-34)

Already at the time of that writing, zeal is fading among Christians and the writer tells them to stir up one another to do good works. In the early days they were willing to endure suffering – and rather than just give things away, they accepted the plundering of their property joyfully. Why? Because they knew they had a better possession, an abiding one. They knew the value of the salvation won by Christ, just like the Christians of Acts 4. It is the same salvation that Christ bestows upon you.

Therefore, you are set free to be God’s instruments, to give what you have to those in need. And while you are in no way required to sell everything you have, a lack of charity to neighbors and offerings to God are a warning signal – an indication that your possessions have become gods. Face it: greed,

covetousness and a lack of compassion come easy to sinners like you and me, turning the daily bread God gives us into idols which seem more precious to you than the forgiveness Christ has won.

A natural response is along the lines of, "Well, how much should I give?" or "How much do I have to give?" or "How much do I get to keep?" These are all questions that call for a Law answer, a command about generosity. But you don't give to others because you *have to* as a Christian; you do so because you are free to. You do so because you know that you have a better possession and an abiding one. For the sake of Jesus, the kingdom of heaven is yours.

So I cannot tell you how much to give: I can tell you how much we need to meet budget or that there are plenty of needy people around, but not how much you do to help is on you. Rather, I would urge you to examine yourself for sins like greed or fear that would keep you from giving to others. I would bid you to confess them, lest those sins become unforgiven obstacles that eventually lead you to forsake the Lord. And as one forgiven, I would urge you to meditate upon the gift of life that God has given you. As you do so, I would predict that your motivation towards giving grows – not because you *have to* change, but because you *have been* changed.

For you have a better possession and an abiding one. You have unfailing grace and life all for the sake of Jesus Christ who was crucified for your sins and raised for your salvation. See, there's one more bit of good news in the how those first Christians shared when the Lord blessed them: it's a foretaste of eternal life. Here, there is a poverty of life, health, joy, happiness – all because of sin. But when you are raised from the dead, all such poverty will be gone: the Lord "will wipe every tear from [your] eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4). All poverties will be vanquished, and all that is left is abundance: an abundance of every good gift from God. That's your hope, all for the sake of Jesus Christ, crucified for your sins and raised for your justification. Whatever your amount of daily bread, you are not needy for salvation, because the Lord showers it upon you by His Word and Sacrament. Great grace is upon you, and so you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen